

VIDEO BY STEVE BECK

Bob Keil

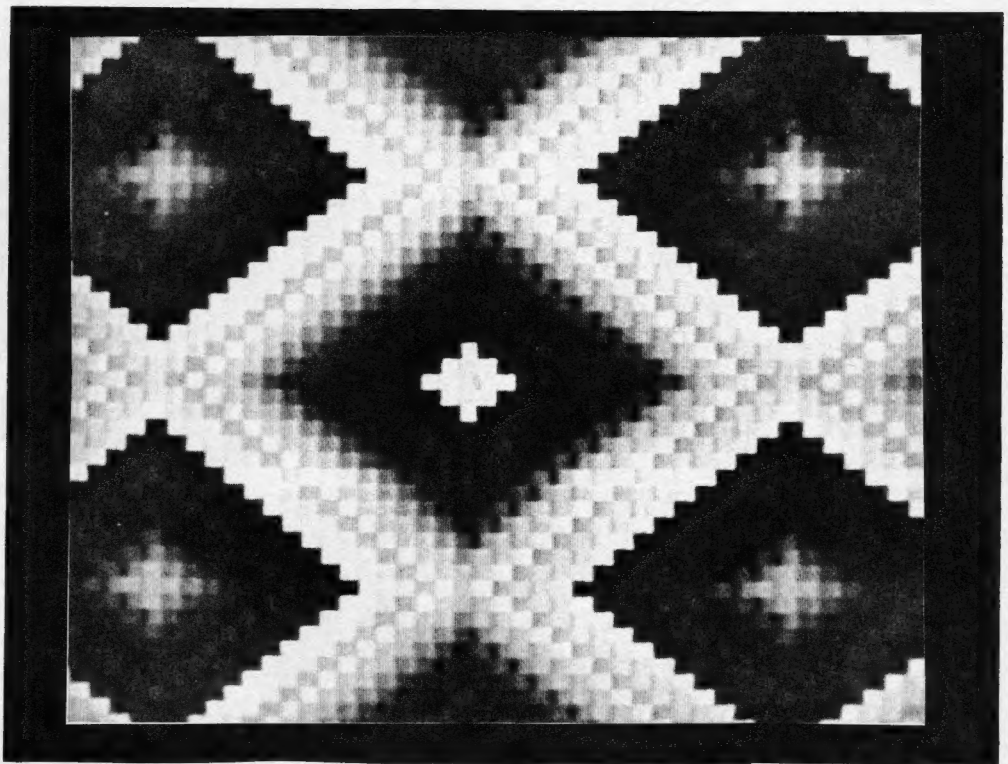
San Francisco

Currently ongoing at Video Free America is a series of six Sunday night programs; in each session a different video artist shows examples of his work, then engages the audience in related discussion.

The first of these evenings (November 20) featured Stephen Beck, video artist and inventor of the direct video synthesizer. Beck, whose work has been widely shown on public television as well as in museums and galleries, showed several medium-length tapes and talked about the process of developing his synthesizer. Surprisingly there were only about a dozen people in attendance — and those who were there were largely associated with art/video in some professional way. But it was a fascinating evening nonetheless.

Beck's work is pure video, insofar as its sensibility is derived from the inherent qualities of television, rather than from those of film, painting, performance, etc. His "Video Weavings" are an extension of traditional weaving, utilizing the capabilities of his synthesizer to generate a large variety of geometric configurations and over four thousand colors. The patterns are woven on the screen and set to music. They tend to resemble Indian or Middle Eastern rugs — but this resemblance, which Beck emphasized by reading a quotation about weaving, is more of a convenience than anything else. Of more importance about Beck's video is that he has found a way to link his consciousness to an image-maker *without* history, at least not in the glaringly derivative manner found in most of the work one sees. The basic power of his tapes, especially *Cycles* (made in collaboration with Jordan Belsen and utilizing some film work to circumvent the outrageously expensive video editing process), comes from a sense of unity between the artist's consciousness and the vision before us as an audience — perhaps, in fact, this linking is the very essential element which, at this time in history, gives video an edge of immediacy over other media whose roots are too deeply interwoven among the threads of past cultures. Visual effects include explosions of colors, anthropomorphic forms, the raw beauty of primal images growing, as if without the control of the will, from the artist's mind. The command that Beck has of the imagery on the screen, mixed with the inherently automatic quality of some of the electronic effects, creates a greater feeling of richness and spontaneity than I have seen in any art in a long time.

Another piece that Beck showed was titled *Anima*, a tape of a woman dancing. He explained that the woman on the tape was in fact a kind of anima figure in his life. Upon hearing that I thought the title might be a little gratuitous — especially since most tapes or films of dance always have seemed to me more profound in the minds of those who made them than in the



VIDEO WEAVINGS, Still
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reaction of the audience. But it was immediately clear that Beck had achieved something beyond the scope of most examples of the genre — a sensuous drifting image appeared, sometimes visible only through the sparkling highlights of her gown and limbs, the deep reddish colors powerfully suggestive of the feminine spirit delicately guiding, balancing, appearing and disappearing. The *Anima* tape was particularly noteworthy for its lovely, controlled use of the medium — and rarely have I seen an electronic medium produce such a graceful and quietly humane effect.

In its larger context Beck's work, if it is *about* anything, has to do with the alchemy of technology, the process whereby the base metal of circuitry and components is transformed magically into the gold of images hitherto unavailable to the eye and disclosing things about the mind and our relation to the universe which could not otherwise be revealed. Working before a monitor, watching the creation of a whole world which takes on its own life, develops its own elements spontaneously via infinitely possible configurations, is a process akin to the highest level of mysticism, the bringing of pure nonbeing into being, into at least the level of transforming perception. More than any other medium, where sheer materiality and historical weight are obstacles to extending one's vision beyond time and space, synthesized video has the elements of a spiritual form insofar as it combines an image-making tool with an iconography which has not yet been developed or codified, which still allows the soul to reveal itself. This is not to say that someday video will avoid being as cliché ridden as older media — in fact the potential clichés of electronic art already exist.

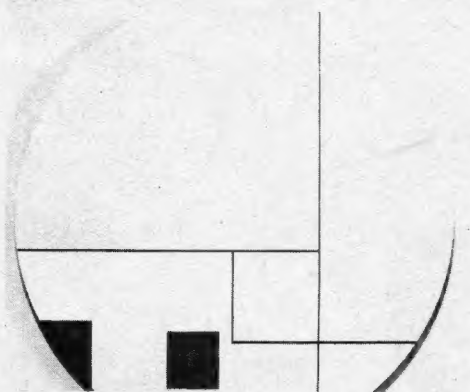
In contrast to this approach, the work of Skip Sweeney, which was shown the following Sunday, was much closer to traditional film. He did offer one tape of color feedback which was purely abstract and one half-documentary/half-synthesized piece intermingling scenes of the making of a tape with synthesized elements. The main event

point, unless of course you are the artist himself. I have not seen other documentary work by Sweeney, but perhaps those tapes which do not hit so close to home are more objectively edited.

Actually, however, Sweeney's tape brought up an issue which is important to video artists — that is, that the medium is seductively easy to use to record anything, and as a result, an additional amount of self-control is necessary, perhaps even more self-criticism than you would need in film, because in film the precedents are set and the sheer physicality and expense of dealing with film tends to promote a natural impulse to be careful and not waste. Sweeney's documentary could have been done on film, whereas Beck's work could not have. □

"FIFTH SUN" CATALOG AVAILABLE

The catalog for *The Fifth Sun: Contemporary/Traditional Chicano and Latino Art*, an exhibit recently on display at the University Art Museum, Berkeley (ARTWEEK, November 5), is now in stock at the UAM bookstore. The publication documents the Chicano and Latino artistic movement in the Bay Area.



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